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C O N F I D E N T I A L PRETORIA 002621

STATE FOR AF/FO, AF/W AN DAF/RSA FOR WHALDEMAN

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SUBJECT: SOUTH AFRICA SUPPORTS MAURITANIA'S ELECTED
PRESIDENT

REF: ADDIS ABABA 03240

Classified By: Political Counselor Raymond L. Brown. Reasons 1.5 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: On December 1, 2008 Department of Foreign Affairs' (DFA) North Africa division Chief Director Ambassador Ebrahim Saley, Director Ambassador Delarey Van Tonder and Deputy Director Lara Swart told Poloff that South Africa recognizes and supports democratically elected President Sidi Mohamed Ould Abdallahi of Mauritania. They expect the delegation led by Mauritania's National Assembly Speaker Messaoud Ould Boulkheir (see reftel) to ask South Africa to help build African Union (AU) support for the ousted government. End summary.

SAG RECOGNIZES ABDALLAHI GOVERNMENT

12. (C) Saley said the South African Government (SAG) was surprised by the military coup of August 6, 2008. After the August 2003 coup, the SAG supported the Mauritanian government's roadmap to democracy. The SAG sent observer and technical teams to assist with the March 2007 elections. As the country appeared to be making a steady return to constitutional government, the SAG moved forward with plans to open an embassy there.

13. (C) South Africa's representative to Mauritania, Ambassador Kotane, arrived in Nouakchott a week before the August 2008 coup, before presenting credentials. Saley said it was "very clear" that Kotane could not present credentials as the SAG still recognized the democratically elected president. He said the SAG initially was optimistic that Abdallahi would be reinstated quickly and still has not made a decision to recall the ambassador, mostly as a courtesy to the ambassador and his family who were not eager to leave so soon after their arrival. Saley thinks the DFA will take a decision on this in January, after the holidays.

14. (C) The Mauritanian Embassy informed the DFA on November 24 that the junta government was recalling the Mauritanian ambassador to South Africa and would replace him with a charge. Saley said it was unlikely that the SAG would accept an ambassador representing the junta government. He added that the DFA had already discouraged several junta representatives from coming to South Africa for official meetings as the SAG would not accept them.

SAG MESSAGE: PRO-DEMOCRACY, ANTI-VIOLENCE

15. (C) Saley said the SAG has been very consistent in sending the message that those within Mauritanian society who object to government policies must resolve their problems through constitutional means. He said, "It is important that the

international community holds (Mauritania's political leadership) to democratic principles." According to Saley, the SAG has encouraged democracy supporters in Mauritania to avoid violence because it will become difficult for the international community to support violent opposition to the military junta. He believes under the surface Mauritanian society is "quite volatile."

BOULKHEIR DELEGATION SEEKS SAG SUPPORT ON THE CONTINENT

¶16. (C) Saley predicts that the Boulkheir delegation will ask South Africa to help build support for the ousted government on the African continent. He thinks the delegation is concerned that certain AU members may not be hard enough on the military junta. He said Morocco and Senegal fall into this category, while the Libyans are ambivalent. Saley thinks the delegation will seek South Africa's support in the way the AU deals with the military junta, specifically, whether a representative of Abdallahi or the military junta will fill Mauritania's seat at the AU, or whether that seat will be empty. He thinks it is unlikely that the junta will be allowed to represent Mauritania at the AU. He had no comment on specific actions South Africa will take to support Abdallahi at the AU or on the continent. Saley expects that the delegation will meet with President Motlanthe. The delegation's arrival in South Africa is uncertain as they await a meeting with President Jakaya M. Kikwete in Tanzania.

¶17. (C) Saley pointed out that the DFA issued a statement shortly after the AU condemning the August 6 coup even without the foreign minister's clearance because the SAG's position on this was "clear cut" and South Africa is a "very responsible member of the AU." Text follows.

¶18. (U) Begin text: South Africa has noted with serious concern media reports of an alleged military coup in Mauritania today Wednesday August 6 2008.

South Africa like the rest of the international community has never countenanced the use of military coups to settle political issues. In this regard, South Africa joins the entire international community in expressing its outright and unequivocal condemnation of such unconstitutional transfer of power.

Accordingly, South Africa like the rest of humanity calls for an immediate return to democracy and the rule of law. South Africa will continue to monitor the situation closely before making any further and comprehensive response to the situation."

¶19. (U) End text.

¶10. (C) Comment: Although some observers question South Africa's support for democratic electoral outcomes when it comes to Zimbabwe, for example, the SAG is unequivocally on the side of democracy and rule of law when it comes to Mauritania. The SAG is comfortable in condemning the military junta with the backing of the AU and international community. South Africa is likely to support Abdallahi within the AU, but Abdallahi should not expect great exertion from the SAG as Mauritania does not feature as a strategic policy concern compared with other South African domestic and foreign policy priorities.

BOST